

MISCELLANEOUS NOTES

1. OCCURRENCE OF THE RUSTYSPOTTED CAT *PRIONAILURUS RUBIGINOSUS* (GEOFFROY) IN SRIHARIKOTA, NELLORE DISTRICT, ANDHRA PRADESH, INDIA

The status and distributional range of the Rustyspotted Cat *Prionailurus rubiginosus* remains a mystery. Earlier, its range was considered to be confined to south-western India. However, since the 1970s, reports were also obtained from Jammu and Kashmir, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Maharashtra and Gujarat (Jackson 1998; Mukherjee 1998). In Andhra Pradesh, the Rustyspotted Cat has been recently recorded in the Godavari and Telengana regions. Very little is known of the ecology and habitat of the species, reported to range from grassland, scrub and forest, rocky outcrops, areas around human habitation and even in house attics (Jackson 1998; Mukherjee 1998).

In this communication, we report a sighting of the Rustyspotted Cat in Sriharikota, Nellore district, Andhra Pradesh. Sriharikota is an island (181 sq. km), bounded on the west by Pulicat Lake and on the east by the Bay of Bengal. Openings of the Pulicat Lake into the Bay of Bengal skirt the northern and southern boundaries of the Island. The vegetation of the Island comprises of a mixture of tropical dry evergreen forest, scrub jungle, abandoned village forest, grasslands with scattered trees, mangrove-salt marsh patches, and plantations of eucalyptus, casuarina and cashew. The Island is a restricted area under the control of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). ISRO has a Conservation and Landscape Division for the conservation and management of the biodiversity of the Island.

The BNHS has an on-going 3-year ISRO funded project on the faunal diversity of the Island, and the Rustyspotted Cat has been recorded during some of the field visits during the first year of the project. The first record was of a road kill on October 12, 2002 near the Penubakkam Labour Colony – the skin and skull has been preserved. Two weeks later, we sighted another individual during night census in a mixed forest of eucalyptus and natural forest. This was followed by two sightings of a male (probably the same individual) during the day in scrub-natural forest habitat on the 23rd and 24th of the same month. The fourth sighting was of a three-quarter grown individual during a night census on November 24, 2002 in a casuarina plantation on the coast.

According to the tribal Yanadis, the Rustyspotted Cat, locally known as *Mottabala Pilli*, is common on the Island. It is said to be much more common than the Jungle Cat *Felis chaus* (Jangan Pilli). Yanadis say that the Rustyspotted Cat keeps to the forest, and unlike the Jungle Cat, does not venture into villages to prey on domestic fowl.

July 18, 2003

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2. OCCURRENCE OF THE RUSTYSPOTTED CAT *PRIONAILURUS RUBIGINOSUS* (GEOFFROY) IN NUGU WILDLIFE SANCTUARY, KARNATAKA

As part of our study on lesser-known mammals in Karnataka, we surveyed the Nugu Wildlife Sanctuary (3032 ha) for small and nocturnal mammals. The Sanctuary lies between 11° 52' 47" - 11° 59' 00" N and 76° 26' 10" - 76° 28' 37" E. The altitude varies between 742 and 959 m above msl and the mean annual rainfall is about 1000 mm. The major vegetation type in the Sanctuary is scrub forest. The survey was carried out during nights by flashing light from a jeep moving at the speed of 10 km/hr. On April 16, 2003 at 1950 hrs, we spotted a Rustyspotted Cat (*Prionailurus rubiginosus*). The animal was in a Fig (*Ficus bengalensis*) tree at a height of about 5 m, and

the tree height was about 16 m. The animal was sitting on a branch with thick foliage. Because of the disturbance caused by our presence, the animal moved to an open area and became completely visible to us. We watched the animal for about 20 minutes. The white ventral portions were dotted with black spots. The dorsal grey hair with a reddish tinge had rusty spots, and the tail was without any spots or markings. Without any hesitation, we identified the animal as Rustyspotted Cat and later confirmed it by referring to Prater (1998) and Gurung and Singh (1996). The animal was in a tree at the border between the Sanctuary and cultivated croplands. The closest

village was at about half a kilometer.

The distribution of Rustyspotted Cat in India is based only on a few reports about its occurrence: Chakraborty (1978) in Jammu and Kashmir, Pathak (1990) in Gujarat, Chavan *et al.* (1991) in Gujarat, Tehsin (1994) in Rajasthan, Digveerendrasinh (1995) in Madhya Pradesh, Acharjyo *et al.* (1997) in Orissa, Dubey (1999) in Maharashtra, and Rao *et al.* (1999) in Andhra Pradesh. Although the species is reported to be widespread, from southern India to some parts of Kashmir (Prater 1998), the only published report from southern India was from Andhra Pradesh (Rao *et al.* 1999). However, Mukherjee (1998) mentions its occurrence in Mundanthurai plateau on the basis of personal communications from field researchers. Mudappa (pers. comm.) reported its occurrence in Indira Gandhi Wildlife Sanctuary. Our report confirms its occurrence in the state of Karnataka.

All published papers on Rustyspotted Cat are only occurrence reports, and no detailed studies are available on this species. However, each of such reports contributes in understanding its distribution, locality and habitat type. Hence, the present sighting is important, since it marks the 'southern most sighting location' of its distribution in India. The scrub forests of Nugu Wildlife Sanctuary and its edges continuing

with croplands had only few tall trees of more than 5 m in height. Since the Rustyspotted Cat is an arboreal species, inhabiting scrub forests, grasslands, and ruins near villages (Gurung and Singh 1996; Prater 1998), special attention must be paid to the maintenance of large trees dispersed throughout such regions where it occurs, as such trees are essential to provide a viable habitat for this species.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge the financial support (Grant No. SP/SO/C-16/99) from the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India. We thank the Karnataka Forest Department for permissions. Special thanks are due to Mr. Devraj, ACF, Mr. Basavaraju, RFO, and their field staff at Nugu.

September 4, 2003

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3. DISAPPEARANCE OF ELEPHANTS IN UTTARA KANNADA

We carried out a survey of mammals in Uttara Kannada, Karnataka, between February and April, 2002. During a walk of 198 km in several regions, in addition to direct sightings, the locals, officials of the Public Works Department and Karnataka Forest Department were interviewed to gather information on the occurrence of different animal species in each region. We found that an elephant herd had disappeared from Gersoppa region. Locals and officials stated that during 1992, two elephants were found dead in the backwaters of the

Gersoppa Dam. In 1995, three more elephants were found dead in the water. Only one old adult male was left that used to range in the forests between Mastimane and Votehalla on Joga-Gersoppa road. During our survey, we had also found dung and signs of fresh movement of the elephant. But this elephant was also reported dead by the end of 2002. The details on the death of this elephant were not available and not revealed by anyone. However, there are no elephants in the region anymore.